

## **Persuasive Communication as a Tool of Politics and Electoral Victory**

<sup>1</sup>Gbaden Jacob Chiakaan, PhD, <sup>2</sup>William Musa Madaki and <sup>3</sup>Juliana Sibe Shamah

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication Taraba State University, Jalingo.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Nasarawa State Polytechnic, Lafia.

<sup>3</sup>Department of General Studies Nasarawa State Polytechnic, Lafia.

### **Abstract**

This paper is titled: Persuasive Communication: A Tool of Politics and Winning Elections. The aim of the paper is to bring to bear the fact that politics leading to election victory by Politian's cannot be possible without effective application of persuasive communication. The paper is anchored on two theoretical postulations of hierarchy of human needs and uses and gratification. Data were mainly collected from secondary sources particularly textbooks and other written documents and contextually presented and analyzed. The data analyzed, in this regard, revealed that political debate, advertising, campaign rallies are fundamental strategies of the political process aimed at winning elections. The paper goes further to discuss the relevance of persuasive communication in politics noting that where political office seekers fail to employ the weapon of persuasive communication, they can fail. The paper, therefore recommends, among others, research as a way of finding out what are the needs of the electorates. It also advises political candidates embarking on persuasive communication to be mindful of certain variables on their part such as their credibility, personality traits, charisma, power and so on.

**Keywords:** Persuasion, Communication, Politics, Government and Elections.

### **Introduction**

Politics can never be successfully carried out without the sound usage of persuasive communication. This means that persuasive communication is an indispensable tool of obtaining political victory. This position derives its strength from the fact that for people to support a political party or a political candidate to win election and form a government they must be communicated to persuasively. Still, persuasive communication can be deployed as a weapon of attracting support for a government so that such a government can succeed. In this regard, persuasive communication can be used to build and sustain support for government in power. It was, historically, used by the military to prolong itself in power in Nigeria. Particularly, in the days of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Comrade Ckukwu Merije was saddled with the responsibility of persuading Nigerians and the international community to support the annulment of the famous June 12, 1993 presidential election (Chiakaan, 1997). The Sani Abacha led military junta which later came into power as a result of the eventual failure of the Babangida's regime, was not left out in the usage of persuasive communication to seek relevance and support from Nigerians and the international community. This can be noticed in his political communication programmes as exemplified in his Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA).

The same persuasive communication that was used by the nationalists in the emancipation of Nigeria from colonization was still adopted by the pro-democrats in pushing the military out of

power and installing democracy. In the struggle for the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria, pro-democrats persuasively informed their fellow Nigerians why they should not support the military. They convincingly persuaded Nigerians to be ready to die in order to send the military out of power. Different fora were used; they used both oral and written communications; they used the mass media dominantly instigating Nigerians and the international community against the military. The use of persuasive communication or communication generally for the sake of winning power, maintaining power and sustaining power is what is referred to as political communication.

In his attempt at uncovering strategies for winning public support for an issue, Jimoh (2004) in Chiakaan and Chile (2015, p.62) state:

Yet persuasive strategies are needed to carry both the masses and critical sections of the society such as the mass media. In stressing this importance, notable political writer, McNair (1995:45) notes that “Political Communication is too important to be ignored by those with concern for the working of modern democracies.

Since persuasive communication is a very important instrument of politics, it means it has to be studied so that it can be successfully applied by government, political parties and politicians seeking elections. This is what this paper is all about. In order to be more holistic, however, the paper is presented under the following sub-themes:

- i. Politics, Election and Persuasive Communication in Perspective.
- ii. Theoretical framework
- iii. Relevance of Persuasive Communication in Politics.
- iv. Applying Persuasive Communication to Win Election
- v. Summary and Conclusion

### **Politics, Election and Persuasive Communication in Perspective**

Politics, like many other concepts, has no single definition. On a general note, however, whenever the term politics is mentioned, one thing comes to mind first; that thing is power. Politics is commonly inclined to acquiring power and exercising that power. Since it is concerned with power acquisition and distribution, which concerns everybody in the society, Aristotle is always quoted as to have said that man is a political animal. Osuji (2001,p.7), on this note, attests to this when he says:

This is exactly what Aristotle said, hence it is evidence that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by more accident is without state, is either a bad man or above humanity, he is like the troubles, lawless, heartless one whom Homer denounces the natural outcast is for a cover of war, he may be compared as an isolated piece at draught (sic). Now that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animal is evident. Nature as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech.

The society or state man belongs to, lives and survives by politics for the benefit of man. This means that the society cannot just be left like that; it must be governed for the betterment of man. The decision of what kind of government to be in place, how such a government can be formed, and the sustenance of that government is what everybody participates in directly or indirectly. This explains Aristotle's position that man is a political animal. In his article on Critical Factors in Political Public Relations and Marketing, Utor (2012,p.42 -43) posits that:

Politics on the other hand refers to the process of governance. According to the dictionary of American government and politics, it is an art or science of governance. It is also the means by which the will of a community is derived and implemented. Furthermore, it is the activities of a government, politician, or political party. A more functional definition proffered by the same book is to the effect that politics is the pursuit and exercise of the political process necessary to make binding policy decision for the community and to distribute patronage and other government benefits.

Politics is not different from what has already been said based on the foregoing discussion. Activities of government are inclined to politics, activities of politicians and political parties are inclined to politics. These activities are aimed at acquiring political power in order to take decisions necessary for the wellbeing of individuals and their entire community or state. Politics has also been defined by Oakshott (1963) in Udoakah, (2003,p.18) as "...a set of activities attending to the general arrangement of a set of people and the act of settling the affairs of the society through rational discussion and decision." According to this definition, politics is concerned with a set of activities which are inclined to the general public. Politics involves discussion about the affairs of society aimed at arriving at better decisions.

Politics, on this note, means series of actions or activities which people in our society embark upon with the aim of acquiring power. The power aimed at acquiring, as can be inferred, is broad. It can be political power, it can be economic power, it can be religious power and it can be social power. Of course, of all these forms of power, political power appears to be the greatest. This is because political power, according to political scientists is the ability to control and determine the allocation of scarce resources in the country. This belief informs Wiseman (1966) in Udoakah (1996) to state that "Politics is the striving to share power or influence the distribution of power or the power to make authoritative decisions such as distribution, maintenance or transfer of such power."

There is a struggle for power in politics. The aim is to share or influence the distribution of power to people. Another aim is to acquire power in order to make authoritative decisions concerning the distribution, maintenance or transfer of such power. Politics, on the basis of the available definitions noted above, one can say, is an exercise which is concerned with acquiring power, especially political power. This definition derives its strength from the fact that one with administrative or leadership power can equally possess or influence economic and social power.

In struggling to acquire power, people engage in different activities, they also employ different strategies. Of course, using Nigeria as a case study, people, through political parties make

use, on a serious note, of persuasive communication through the mass media. By so doing the mass media themselves are deeply involved in politics. Citing Alan Ball (1977), Udoakah (2003, p.4) notes:

...Lord Windelsham to have said that the most successful tactics employed by the conservative party to change a hostile electorate into one, more favourable to the party between 1957 and 1959 was the use of party activities at the local levels without first attempting to use the mass media techniques at the disposal of the party.

The point to note here is the fact that political parties make use of the mass media in order to mobilize people, both in urban and rural areas, towards supporting them. The mass media, in this regard, embark on a number of activities aimed at reaching the masses with political messages. One way they do this is by producing political advertising. Balland (1989) cited in Udoakah (2003,p.5) states that political advertising is the “paid placement of organisation messages in the media.” This means that political advertising is the purchase and use of advertising space or airtime messages to a mass audience. Udoakah, in line with the foregoing discourse, observes thus:

Political and advertising is now the major means by which candidates and their parties communicate their messages to voters. It has constituted the mainstream of modern electoral politics. It disseminates information about the candidates and parties details, which journalists would not give. These advertisement, like product and service advertisement do not inform but are designed to persuade.

Politicians and their political parties embark on campaigns in order to win the favour and support of the electorates so that they can gain political power. Campaigns leading to elections, therefore, become one way through which power is acquired and distributed. This is technically referred to as political process. Election, on this note, is one of the political processes. On a broader note, political process, Osuji (2001,p.9) states, “involves the activities of politicians, administrators, elected official bureaucrats in the organization or administration of political actions in the interest of the people.” Osuji goes further to state that political process includes formation of political parties and their organization, holding of elections, giving responsibilities to those hold in g political offices either elected or appointed, Inaking of rules and regulations, by laws, constitution, amending them and so on.

Particularly, in a democratic set up, government cannot be formed without election being conducted. In this regard, election is a process in which people vote to choose a person or group of people to hold an official position on their behalf . We all participate in elections in order to choose people as presidents, governors, assembly members, local government chairmen, councilors and so on.

Before election is conducted, campaign is normally carried out by political parties and their candidates in order to convince people or the electorates to vote them into power. The campaign period is a period that gives room for political candidates to swim persuasive communication and communication generally into action in order to seek followership and

votes from the electorates or members of the public. Communication plays a dominant role in this regard, in the whole political process.

Without members of the public being persuasively communicated to, political candidates will hardly win elections. Persuasive communication, therefore, is a conscious and deliberate efforts by a communicator to influence a communicattee to take a decision that is in The favour of the communicator. Ajala (2001, p.65) offering a somewhat similar definition, states:

To put “persuasive communication” into focus, a conscious effort made by someone with the aim of influencing the thoughts or actions of another person is persuasive communication. It is a communication process which the communicator seeks to elicit a desired response, or attempts to influence the behaviour of the listener...

When political parties, when political office seekers deliberately or consciously attempt to influence the electorates or the masses to vote for them so that they can win election, it is persuasive communication. Generally, the usage of communication to win election or do well in an election is referred to as political public relations. According to Osuji (2001:13) political public relations:

Is that aspect of public relations that is used in furtherance of political process. It may cover very many areas of political processes, party formation, political campaign, membership drive, public and private political communications, image building, influence, lobbying, legislative proceedings, executive relationship with various societal groups etc.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This paper adopts two theories of uses and gratification as well as the hierarchy of human needs.

#### **The Theory of Hierarchy of Human Needs**

The Hierarchy of human needs theory is one of the theories of human motivation invented in the 20th century by a psychologist, Abraham Maslow. It is so called because it explains the motives why consumers react positively to an advert message. Of course, the theory appreciates the fact that peoples’ reaction to an advert message is strongly motivated by the ability of such a message to provide them with any of their needs which are hierarchically inclined. Maslow, on this note, reiterates the position of economists that human wants are numerous and as such are based on preference (scale of preference) so that attaining the m i s done according to their importance. Consequently, his theory recognizes five basic levels of human needs which are arranged hierarchically on the basis of their importance (Belch and Belch, 2001,p.110). These five needs include:

**Physiological Needs:** These needs are primary needs. They are things which human beings require in order to sustain life. Needs in the category are food, shelter, clothes, sex, and so on.

**Safety:** After primary needs, human beings become conscious of their security and protection.

**Social Needs:** Human beings want to belong to groups. They want to establish relationships with others. The reason is to be loved and accepted. On this note, love, affection, belonging, and acceptance are the social needs which human beings try to acquire after they feel secured and protected from harm.

**Esteem Needs:** The needs in this category, are self-esteem, recognition and status. Here, human beings want to possess certain things in order to have a sense of accomplishment and gain recognition or popularity and status. Some people do not want to be rich but they want to be famous. Some people want respect, when they acquire this desire, they feel accomplished.

**Self-actualization Needs:** Another name for self-actualization is self-fulfillment. When all other needs are attained, human beings have a feeling that they have actualized their desire in life. This is what is referred to as self-fulfillment or self-actualization.

The needs at the lower level, according to this theory, are more important and as such must be acquired first. After them, the ones on the second, third, fourth, and fifth levels can be attained. Even though, as Belch and Belch (2001) observe, Maslow's theory is not perfect, it is a good theory that can be of benefit to persuasive communicators especially political parties and their candidates seeking the support of electorates to win elections and form government. Where they promise performing effectively so that these wants as pointed out by the Maslow theory of hierarchy of human needs can be achieved, they can succeed in influencing the voting behavior of the electorates. This theory is, therefore, relevant to this discourse.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory**

People have needs which must be realized. Of course, this is the concern of the uses and gratification theory. This theory propounded by Elihu Katz in 1959, holds that it is not the people who exist for the media but instead that it is the media that exist for the people. The fundamental question here, Katz asks is: What do people do with media? The response he provides is that people are very rational in patronizing the media. They use the media due to the social and psychological benefits they can derive from them. Mass mediated messages can only influence people on the basis of how appealing they are to their needs. Acknowledging Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), Littlejohn (1999, p.345) declares:

Compared with classical effects studies, the uses and gratification approach takes the media consumer rather than the media message as its starting point and explores his communication behaviour in terms of his direct experience with the media. Thus, it does not assume a direct relationship between messages and effects, but instead that members of the audience put messages to use, and that such usages act as intervening variables in the process of effect.

McQuail (1994, p.320) provides a list containing motives for and satisfaction which people derive from the media use. They include:

- i. Getting information and advice
- ii. Reducing personal insecurity
- iii. Learning about society and the world
- iv. Finding support for one own life

- v. Gaining insight into one own life
- vi. Experiencing empathy with problems of others
- vii. Having a substitute for social contact
- viii. Feeling connected with others
- ix. Escaping from problems and worries
- x. Gaining entry into an imaginary world.
- xi. Filling time
- xii. Experiencing emotional release
- xiii. Acquiring a structure of daily routine

Where people perceive a media message as not offering them any gratification , they can shun it thereby avoiding the effect such a message can exercise on them.

One problem critics have with this theory is its refusal to appreciate influence which communication media exercise on their audience unconsciously especially in this modern world. Of course, it is still the belief of critics that an individual's personality can sometime s influence his patronage and n o t his needs. In spite of these criticisms, the truth is that any persuasive message that fails to reflect the various needs or problems which people encounter in life is bound to suffer lack of patronage significantly.

These two theories are relevant to this discussion because member s of the public otherwise referred to as electorates cannot be successfully persuaded by those seeking political offices in their campaigns without promising them what they will benefit from them if they vote them into power. Parties' manifestoes must be based on the needs of the people. Former American President, Barrack Obama promised Americans, among other things, strong security, combating terrorism and a strong and viable economy. The current American President, Donald Trump's Campaign slogan "America for America" meaning returning the American country to people who are real Americans, people who are American citizen by birth and making America to remain the world's biggest economy and otherwise, contributed to his victory at the polls. Since these were what the Americans were really after, they voted him into power.

Goodluck Ebere Jonathan promised Nigerians, among other things, a strong economy, viable power and energy sector, which made them to vote for him in 2010. After spending almost four years in office, Nigerians could not derive these benefits; they voted him and his PDS out of power bringing in All Progressive Party under Mohammadu Buhari as President.

### **Relevance of Persuasive Communication in the Political Process**

From what has been said so far, it can be deduced that persuasive communication is an indispensable tool in the political process. Beginning with party formation and organization, holding of elections, giving responsibilities to those elected or appointed, making rules and regulations, bylaws, constitution, amending them and so on, persuasive communication is relevant.

For a party to be formed, individuals must convince themselves as to why they have to come together to form it and what will be the manifesto of their party. The party has to persuasively, base on its manifesto, influence members of the public to join it. This same party and

its candidates for election, must go out persuading members of the public to vote it into power. The entire electoral process is dominated by persuasive communication. Expressing his views on the subject matter of political campaign: Making Meanings and Creating Images, Oso (2003, p.147) posits:

The nature off the “war” that is politic s, is seen openly displayed during the period of elections when the contending parties and their candidates attempt to win the hearts of the people to their views, perspectives or ideologies using campaigns, debates etc.

Persuasive communication is very exigent because it helps, political candidates to win the hearts of the people. During political campaigns, the electorates are presented with the images of what kind of environment a party can create for them if voted into power. In many in stances, each party tries to oppose the ideas or discredit the ideas of other parties so as to win the support and followership of the electorates. On this note, Oso (2003, p.148) says further:

Political campaign is essentially a process of meanings and images communication. Resources are deployed in creating messages either seeking support and/or discrediting the position, views and ideology of opponents. The mass media are the main channels for publicly communicating messages and symbols of the competing parties and individuals involved in the campaigns to the general populace.

Even though there are different avenues or form so fusing communication persuasively to influence the electorates and win elections or do well at elections, them as s media appear to be the major elements of reaching members of the public with persuasive messages about political candidates and party activities generally. By using the mass media, almost every member of the public becomes aware of the parties seeking elections, their manifestoes and their candidates. This is very important as it influences them to vote for them or not.

Politicians seeking votes embark on debate, advertising and other persuasive strategiestoinfluencefollowershipandvotesfrommemberofthepublic.A research conducted by Paul Lazarsfield in the 60swhich later spurred further research by communication scholars showed that political campaign through the media was capable of influencing the voting behaviour of many Americans. Oso (2003), in this regard, still posits:

Another important development in contemporary thinking about media and campaign was the agenda setting, introduced after research on the 1968 presidential elections. Agenda setting was used to explain how media can influence campaigns and voting. Media helped set the issue or agenda for the campaign and that agenda dictated the issues on which many people ultimately based their voting decisions.

Through campaigns inform of debate and advertising, members of the public are influenced by political office seekers. In the 1993, the television debate between Moshood Abiola and Bashir Tofa helped in influencing the voting attitudes of Nigerians in favour of the acclaimed winner of that annulled elections, Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP).



## **Applying Persuasive Communication in Winning Elections**

If we have all agreed that persuasive communication is a very powerful apparatus for winning elections, it means, therefore, that it is imperative to master how it can be applied to achieve positive results. Basically, the foundation upon which every successful persuasive communication must be built is research. The political candidate must find out what are the needs of the people seeking their votes or support. Needs are uncountable, in this regard, he must identify the basic ones. Having identified their needs, he must determine what language and what channel or channels he can use in reaching them. Significantly, the audience must be studied and properly understood.

Folarin (1998) partly summarises this position by advising that the persuader should carry out the analysis of the audience, using the right people to carry his message to his communicattees where he is to make use of other people as his representatives, and select the appropriate media to include direct media, group media, modern mass media, traditional media. Political candidates must be conscious of certain factors associated with them that can make them succeed or fail in their persuasive communication. Ajala (2001, p.65) identifies and explains them under the influence of the communicator. They include:

**Source Credibility:** Credibility, in this regard, should be held as set of perceptions the receivers (electorates) hold about the source, in this case, the politician. Do they trust you? Do they perceive you as having the expertise, prestige, and competence, authoritativeness and character to represent them or to be entrusted with political power? All these put together, make a political product credible or otherwise in the eyes of the electorates.

**Personality Traits of the Source:** Communicattees or the people being persuaded are more likely to change from a negative to a positive position if they perceive the political product as pleasant, kind, friendly, fair, forgiving, calm, patient and selfless.

**Charisma of the Source:** If the source or political candidate seeking election does not possess the leadership charisma; that special magical power that is not easy to define, he can hardly influence some electorates. President Kennedy appeared on Television to have more Charisma than Richard Nixon who rather appeared old or weak in the 1960 presidential debate in America (Dominick, 1991)

**Beauty or Attractiveness of Source:** A political candidate seeking election who appears ugly and unattractive can hardly elicit greater attitude change in the message being received. Ajala notes that this explains why it is generally believed that when celebrities talk, people listen. Where the source of a message is perceived as beautiful or handsome, receivers are more likely to identify with him.

**Power of Source:** Where the source is perceived by the receivers as possessing the power to exert over another or others, it can make him to be more successful in his communication. There is financial power, academic power, knowledge power and soon. Where a political candidate is perceived as having these power, he can also be successful in persuading the electorates to vote for him in an election.

These factors discussed above are styled by Ajala as the qualities of the source of persuasive messages. Ajala still goes ahead to offer other tips that can be helpful to those willing to apply persuasive communication or political public relations to win elections or score a political point. The tips are:

- i. Emotional Appeals: Humour, warmth and sometimes fear, do some times have more effect than logical appeals.
- ii. Form/style of presentation of message particularly gesture codes such as smile, shrug, gaze, blink, eye contact, head movement etc. May play major roles in attitude change of subordinates.
- iii. Drawing conclusion in communication is more effective than leaving audience to draw their own conclusion.
- iv. Repetition of the message within limits may reinforce message effect.
- v. Primary and recency affect message impact. What is heard or seen first and last are psychologically more important than what is in the middle.
- vi. Particularly in face-to-face communication, both how the message is said and, non-verbal, non-linguistic forms of communication help to ensure message effectiveness. Even the clothes worn, by the communicator, the smell that emanates from the communicator, go a long way in ensuring message acceptance and adherence to instructions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Politics is broad but in this paper, we have reduced it to whatever arrangements or efforts being made by political office seekers and their parties to win elections. The entire political process is dominated by persuasive communication. Political parties need to persuade the electorates, based on their programmes to influence their voting behavior in the parties favour. Political parties should, therefore, never hesitate to employ persuasive communication otherwise referred to as political public relations to influence voters' voting behaviour.

During elections, political candidates and their parties can employ advertising and public debate using the mass media, particularly radio and television to influence the opinions and attitudes of the electorates. The mass media are, therefore, indispensable political tools. Politicians should also use other media like traditional media, direct media, group and multi-media to influence favourable voting attitudes of the electorates.

Of course, for politicians to be successful in persuading voters effectively, they must identify, through research, what are the key needs of such voters and use them as a weapon of influencing them. They must be perceived, in this regard, by the electorates as being credible, having the right personality traits, charisma, being beautiful or attractive and possessing power. They should be able to apply the right persuasive strategies by presenting their messages repeatedly particularly in an emotionally and stylish manner.

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